

The Senator Who Speaks for President Reagan

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WASHINGTON, Oct. 1 — When Paul Laxalt talks, like the man from E. F. Hutton, everyone listens.

Late Tuesday evening, for example, his working style was on display on the Senate floor, which was in disarray. The President had asked Congress to raise the debt limit to the politically perilous sum of more than \$1 trillion, and the Republicans were wary of being tagged as big spenders.

In desperation, Senator Howard H. Baker Jr., the majority leader, turned to the junior Senator from Nevada.

"I asked Paul to help with some of our members who weren't totally convinced of the righteousness of our cause," Senator Baker recalled. "I said, 'Paul, I need some help, things are going to get tight.'"

Seeking Out Votes

And so Paul Laxalt went to work, foraging for votes. He buttonholed Republican colleagues, speaking softly but insistently. "The President needs your vote," he said, and his targets knew that they were not just listening to a junior Senator, but to the President's man in the United States Senate. Mr. Laxalt produced the needed votes, and the day was saved.

It is a role that the Nevadan has increasingly come to play, a reflection of the deference paid the easy-going, graying, 59-year-old Senator who wears lizard cowboy boots and conservative suits. His natural working style is the soft sell, and his power was immeasurably heightened Nov. 4 with the election of a man he deems closer than a friend.

"We're like brothers, just like brothers," Mr. Laxalt said of his relationship with the President of the United States. "If it's one thing the President needs, it's a good brother."

The two men seem cut from the same cloth. Both are genial, open, low-key Westerners not inclined to take themselves too seriously. They share the same world view, conservative ideology and strong moral values. Both love the out-of-doors, and neither is a workaholic.

The two met while working in Barry Goldwater's Presidential campaign, in 1964, and their friendship flourished when they became governors of neighboring states. One memento of those years, in Mr. Laxalt's office, is a 1968 photograph of the two men on horseback, en route to an overnight campsite, inscribed, "Hey Paul — Here we

were, two 'guys' who didn't know we were going to freeze to death come nightfall. All the best, Ron." Mr. Laxalt managed Mr. Reagan's Presidential campaigns in 1976 and 1980.

The assertion of brotherhood is unusually emotional by political standards, and in the brotherhood of politics, blood is seldom thicker than ballots. Indeed, both men have benefited politically from their personal closeness. The Senator is the President's eyes and ears on Capitol Hill, and gives his old friend candid assessments of the players and the issues.

In exchange, the Senator has become a one-man clearinghouse for his colleagues' requests for favors, appointments, grants and privileges bestowed by the White House. Senator Roger W. Jepsen, Republican of Iowa, said: "I have found that if I want something magical to happen involving the President personally, the person to talk to is Paul Laxalt. It's like talking to the President himself."

Senator Edward M. Kennedy, Democrat of Massachusetts, asked Mr. Laxalt to arrange for President Reagan's presentation of the first Robert F. Kennedy medal to his widow, Ethel. "I called down there, and told them this was a high-priority item," Mr. Laxalt said.

Mr. Laxalt somehow manages to pursue such requests without usurping the powers and prerogatives of the Senate majority leader, who also owes his position to the Nevadan. On the morning after Election Day, Mr. Baker realized that only Mr. Laxalt could come between him and the leadership position. To pre-empt such a move, Mr. Baker telephoned Mr. Laxalt and asked the Nevadan to nominate him for majority leader. Mr. Laxalt immediately agreed.

"They established ground rules early on," said an aide to the Republican leadership. "Senator Laxalt has never done anything but let the mantle of leadership fall on the shoulders of Howard Baker."

Some colleagues believe that the Nevadan lacks the bellyful of fire that would have fueled a challenge to Mr. Baker and that Mr. Laxalt is just as happy to leave the running of the Senate to someone else. Ambition is not Mr. Laxalt's strong suit, nor does he seem to covet the late hours and constant behind-the-scenes work that falls to the majority leader.

In deference to Mr. Laxalt's position, however, Mr. Baker appointed him virtually a member of the leadership. He is invited to meetings of Sen-

ate chairmen, although Mr. Laxalt has not yet attained such status, as well as to leadership meetings at the White House.

"He's a pleasure to work with," Mr. Baker said of Mr. Laxalt. "He's a classy person, totally responsible, with good instincts and insights. I depend on him heavily."

An aide to the Republican leadership said, "If ever there was a symbiotic political relationship, it's between Howard Baker and Paul Laxalt."

One difference between their two roles was manifest in the dispute involving William J. Casey, director of Central Intelligence. Senator Barry M. Goldwater, Republican of Arizona, who is chairman of the intelligence committee, had called for Mr. Casey's resignation, charging that he had shown bad judgment in insisting on the appointment of a Republican campaign colleague, Max Hugel, as chief of cover operations.

As majority leader, Mr. Baker could not challenge the view of a committee chairman, and Mr. Casey's cause appeared doomed. Then Paul Laxalt intervened.

The Case for Casey

"If it were not for Bill Casey," Mr. Laxalt told a news conference, "Ronald Reagan would not have been elected President. We are not going to permit a perfectly decent man to be savaged."

The Senator said later: "Casey and I got to be very close during the campaign. I felt that on the merits, Bill Casey was almost being railroaded."

Despite Mr. Laxalt's closeness with the President, however, the two men have differed on substantive issues. In such cases, the Senator said, "I'm very careful not to translate Paul Laxalt into Ronald Reagan."

On the proposed three-month deferral of cost-of-living increases for Social Security recipients and other pensioners, for example, the Senator said, "I thought the President should have bitten the bullet." But he gave the President's message to Senators, such as Pete V. Domenici of New Mexico, who had urged the deferral. "I simply had to tell them that the President has told me he viewed that to be a solemn campaign promise," Mr. Laxalt said.

As for his special role with Mr. Reagan, the Senator said, "We simply take a look at the total picture, as old friends, and try to come up with some answers."

"It's been working very well," he added. Few Democrats would disagree.